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ABSTRACT

York County (Canada) rolled back the age requirement for kindergarten admission so as to permit the enrollment of four-year-olds wherever space was available. This was done because kindergarten enrollment in many communities were declining and if junior kindergartens were established in all community schools, many would have very small enrollments. Early admission was intended as a right wherever less than 25 "regular age" students were enrolled, and no screening, other than for seniority and special home situations, was intended. Two studies have been undertaken to assess the progress of the early admission child. A longitudinal study of the academic progress of the early admission students of 1969 and their peers is in its third year. Students have been tested in grades 1 and 2 with the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Tests and the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. The groups performed comparable on the grade 2 tests. The second study was concerned with the early admission population during 1971-72. It was discovered that only 29 of 56 elementary schools with kindergartens had enrolled younger students. Of those who were enrolled, 20% were kept in kindergarten for another year, 9% were advanced to a kindergarten-primary mixed class or promoted conditionally to grade 1. A followup study of those retained revealed no apparent indication of increased mobility due to nonpromotion. Questions remaining include: (1) whether early admissions have really eased pressures for a junior kindergarten program; (2) whether a junior kindergarten would better serve the younger students; and (3) whether screening prospective early admissions is pedagogically or politically feasible. (KM)

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EVALUATING AN ALTERNATIVE TO "JUNIOR KINDERGARTENS"

Research on Four-Year-Olds who enrolled in regular kindergarten classes in York County, 1969-72

An address to the Gamma Nu Chapter, Phi Delta Kappa, March 1973
by Brian Burnham, Research Coordinator
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An Alternative

Many educators will be familiar with the factors which have recently moved school boards, such as those in Metropolitan Toronto, to establish "junior kindergartens" for four-year-olds. Perhaps less well known is the means by which the York County Board, operating on Metro's northern boundary, has been offering, since 1969, an alternative to junior kindergartens.

This report will sketch the considerations which lead to York County's decision to place certain four-year-olds and five-year-olds together in a common kindergarten program. Research on the consequences for four-year-olds will be reviewed. And some unanswered questions will be put forward.

It needs to be stressed that this report is designed neither to solicit support for the York alternative nor to try to prove that the program is successful. Rather, this is an interim report of what may be a viable means by which boards like York may meet the pressures for extended early childhood education programs and simultaneously meet other pressures for greater economy.

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When the county board was created in January 1969, two things seemed clear. First, in many communities kindergarten enrollments were declining. Similarly, if junior kindergartens were established in all community schools, many would have very small enrollments. Second, there was some professional and public feeling favouring school programs for children younger than the prevailing cut-off point for kindergarten admission (age five by Dec. 31 of the school year).

Several options were open. One could stand pat. Or some kindergartens could be closed down and some youngsters bused to other schools. Or the board could roll back the birthdate for kindergarten admission so as to permit the enrollment of younger students wherever space was available. These and other options were not mutually exclusive. However, the third alternative would be an economical means of extending an early childhood education opportunity. Precedents for this action trace to the 1930's.

Since September 1969, kindergarten admission has been available, as a parental option, to "children whose 5th birthday falls in the period January 1 - March 21 inclusive in the current (school) year." Available places are

filled from pre-registration lists, commencing with the eldest applicant, except where special home situations (e.g., where English is not the mother tongue) make other arrangements desirable.

"Early admission," if we may use this term to denote enrollment under this provision, was intended as a right wherever less than 25 "regular age" students were enrolled for either of the half-day kindergarten sessions. No screening, other than seniority and special home situations, was intended.

This, then, is the alternative and how it came into being.

Evaluating Outcomes

In assessing the efficacy of this early admissions program, many questions need to be raised. Questions such as, "How well is the policy accepted by parents? Do teachers encounter difficulties with the younger children?" are to be expected, of course. But perhaps it is most important to ask, "How has this policy affected the early admission student?". This report deals with research on the latter question.

Two studies have been undertaken to assess the progress of the early admission youngster.

A longitudinal study of the academic progress of the early admission students of 1969 and their peers is in its third year. To date it has monitored, by means of standardized tests of ability and achievement, a sample group of about 1000 youngsters. It has produced comparative data on the performance of the younger 10 per cent and older 90 per cent in the sample. Unfortunately, some of the younger 10 per cent actually have their birthdates in the last three weeks of December and are not actually early admissions. There are some other limitations of these data, unavoidable flaws as this investigation is actually piggy-backing on a larger study. The net effect is probably negligible, however.

The students in this study have been tested in the spring of their grade 1 and 2 years (1971 and 1972) with the Canadian Cognitive Abilities Tests and the Metropolitan Achievement Tests.

Toward the end of grade 1, the seniors registered a statistically significant superior performance on the abilities test, averaging just over 60 raw score items correct. The juniors averaged under 58. True, when correction is made for age, the IQ's of the juniors is very slightly higher. The important consideration is not, however, the age-related brightness index (IQ) but the actual performance on the mental tasks. By the spring of the grade 2 year,

the difference on the raw scores had dwindled to an insignificant .33 of a raw-score point on an 80-item test (seniors = 63.07, juniors = 62.74). The IQ means, for the record, favor the younger students by 115 over 108.

On the 1971 achievement battery, the seniors and juniors had virtually identical mean average reading scores but the seniors held a statistically significant though small edge in the mathematics tests. In 1972 the reading scores were again almost exactly identical and once again the seniors were slightly more adept at mathematics. They averaged 55 correct answers (vs. 54 for the juniors) of a possible 108 (significant at the .05 level, but probably insignificant for practical classroom matters). On the spelling battery introduced at the grade 2 level, the juniors had a small and insignificant margin. Further analyses revealed that age-related differences were less, on all indicators, than sex-related differences. In summary, it is probably fair to say that the groups performed comparably on the grade 2 tests.

The second study concerned itself with the early admission population in York County kindergartens during 1971-72.

Among the salient findings of this study was the discovery that only 29 of 56 elementary schools with kindergartens had enrolled these younger students. Several schools with available places apparently either chose not to accommodate the younger children or had had no applicants. A few principals reported interviewing the four-year-olds (in the presence of parents) at pre-registration time, with an eye to discouraging enrollment of children "not mature enough to profit from attendance." However, some 140 early admissions went on the kindergarten rolls elsewhere.

Of the 140, three withdrew during the year and 10 transferred out of the system. Of the remaining 127, the interests of 26 (20 per cent) were thought to be better served by another year in kindergarten, 11 (nine per cent) were advanced to a "kindergarten-primary" mixed grade or continuous progress program or "promoted conditionally" to a grade 1 class, and 90 younger students (71 per cent) were unconditionally promoted.

Three criteria were singled out by principals as most important in determining whether a child will profit more from a grade 1 program than another year in kindergarten: personal maturity, social adjustment, and reading readiness.

Personal maturity was interpreted variously as self-awareness or ego development or often as a "sense of self-worth." Social adjustment included "that the child feel comfortable in his surroundings (in order) to take advantage of the program." Willingness to take part and to share (oneself as well as material objects) were mentioned as indicators of social development, as

was peer acceptance of the child. Reading readiness was measured by objective tests which assessed attentiveness to the learning tasks, attention span and perseverance, visual and auditory discrimination, ability to proceed from left to right, and to trace letters, as well as large and small muscle control. Some 24 of 29 schools with early admission pupils used the Watson Reading Readiness Test, and 18 provided some detail of scores. In these cases some 12 schools found the mean average score of the "regular age" pupils was higher, the reverse being true in six schools. Early admission pupils, on the whole, averaged lower but seldom scored as low or as high as the "regular age" pupils at the extremes of the score distributions. Since the typical school had only three or four younger pupils, and many only one or two, score distributions are shaky data at best.

Kindergarten teachers were asked to use a rating scale to estimate the development of each early admission pupil as compared with the average "regular age" pupil. The "average" was pegged at scale value 4, with a range to "very immature" at 1, and "very mature" at 7. Three dimensions were explored. The mean average scores for the early admission pupils were as follows (remember, the "average" regular age pupil would be rated as 4.00):

(a) cognitive and intellectual skills = 3.98
(b) personal and social adjustment = 3.79
(c) physical development = 3.92.

Only in (b) does there seem to be any significant difference -- but not in (c), perhaps surprisingly. Generally, pupils judged to be immature in one dimension were reported as low in one or two other areas also.

In the autumn of 1972 a follow-up study was made of the 26 early admission students who were not promoted. One concern was that parents might withdraw them for placement in another school where they had not experienced "failure." However, when the mobility of the promoted and not promoted early admission youngsters was compared, it was found that almost exactly the same percentages (1) stayed in the same schools as they had attended in 1971-72 (62 vs 63), (2) moved from one York County school to another (26 vs 23), (3) moved outside the jurisdiction (12 vs 14). There were no meaningful differences and no apparent indication of increased mobility due to nonpromotion.

Incidentally, this study did find that five early admission students who were promoted to grade 1, but who subsequently moved out of our jurisdiction, are being required to repeat kindergarten in their new schools.

Questions Remain

While acknowledging the limitations of these and other studies to date, there now are some data for judging the past performance and future utility of this alternative to junior kindergartens.

On January 29, 1973, the York County trustees decided that there was no immediate need for further formal study in this area. This did not mean that all objections have been met or all questions answered. Indeed, at the very next meeting the questions of early admission and early childhood education were raised by trustees again, and discussed once more at a March meeting.

Whether this early admissions policy has really eased pressures for an expensive junior kindergarten program, while making good use of existing places, is one question. Whether a junior kindergarten would better serve these younger students (especially, perhaps, the students not promoted) is another. Whether "screening" the prospective early admissions is pedagogically or politically feasible is yet another matter.

In any case, events to date seem to indicate that an early admission program is a viable interim practice while the junior kindergarten programs in our neighbouring boards are evaluated. Such evaluations may not, however, shed light on certain questions which concern York County educators, such as

(1) what goals and roles for public education are served by programs for children under five years of age?

(2) should considerations other than chronological age or "special home situations" enter into a screening process, or,

(3) should all early admission applicants be accommodated when there is space available?

Agreement on purposes and practices of early childhood education should be more easily reached if thoughtful answers can be found for such questions.

An annotated bibliography, "Early Childhood Education" is in preparation by the Research Office, and should be ready for circulation in May 1973.

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